

# **‘Overcoming’ the ‘*Battlefield of the Mind*’: A Psycho-Linguistic Examination of the Discourse of Digital-Televangelists Self-Help Texts**

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## **Abstract**

This article offers a psychoanalytically informed discursive analysis of the teachings of two leading Christian digital evangelists in the field of Christian ‘Self-help’ texts: Joyce Meyer and Joel Osteen. Meyer and Osteen both have global popularity and multimedia presences.—Influenced by psychosocial theory, we combine linguistic analysis with the ideas of Kleinian and post-Kleinian object relations. Exploring Meyer’s and Osteen’s media usage, we argue that digital and online tools have enhanced their connective ability with their immense audiences. It is argued that such discursive spaces create new psychosocial possibilities and contradictions for their messages of emotional health and self-governance through a combination of scripture and psychological approaches common in secular self-help communication. Both preachers focus on changing ‘language’ and ‘thought’, employing techniques and scripture that require the believer to excessively self-focus, and this process revolves emotionally around the construction of images of an omnipotent, good God and the mind as a spiritual battleground between ‘good’ objects (God) and ‘bad’ (Satan).

## **Introduction**

‘Digital religion’ (Campbell, 2012), is the study of contemporary religions’ use of and response to digital communication technologies: and has been largely sociological in its approach. Conversely, believers and their experiences have, for the most part, been understood through psychological approaches. Whilst a specific branch of media studies is devoted to the study of audiences, research into religious believers as a specific audience group has been limited (Webb, 2017), despite religious media being globally significant in cultural and economic terms. There has also been interest more broadly in the relationship between the digital and the role played by language and discourse in producing affect (Winslow, 2014; Massumi, 2015). Thus, we propose, a gap exists for a psycho-social approach to the engagement with and theorising of faith audiences in digital contexts. Our interest is on the possibilities the digital creates for new forms of engagement with traditional structures such as on-line churches and seeks to explore new ways of connecting with believers through various forms of e-communication such as social media, blogs, websites, apps and emails.

This project emerged initially out of the author’s viewing of prime-time evangelical ministry programming on traditional media: broadcast TV. Both authors were particularly fascinated by the teaching of two ministries, which later became the case-studies we outline below: Joyce Meyer Ministries (*JMM*) and Joel Osteen (Lakewood,

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America's largest church<sup>2</sup>). We were intrigued by the apparent connection made between faith, emotional health and wellbeing, which led us to then explore their extensive related digital outputs and equally vast use of traditional media (television, radio, print) where a variety of affective responses could be observed from what we have called *audience-believers*. This initial review of the outputs led us to begin to formulate two areas of interest: the first concerning the actual discourse and 'texts' and their effects; and the second, if and what role media technologies play in forms of articulating affect and meaning (as used by Hall, 1980 see Slack, 1996).

Thus, the project developed into a two-phase interdisciplinary study: consisting of a literature review and textual analysis followed by primary audience research. This article discusses what has been discovered in Phase One<sup>3</sup> and provides a productive theoretical and methodological approach for the interdisciplinary study of religion and media. What was central here, was that we entered into data collection with the view that the emergent themes (*a la* grounded theory) would dictate the theoretical and analytical directions we took. Therefore, we had no assumptions of what we might or might not find other than our self-reflexivity on what had struck us in our initial encounter with the texts (Evans, 2013). However, this scoping process, and informal interactions with believers (generated by our interest in this material), had highlighted a perception that audience-believers found that these specific preachers 'helped you feel better', and we sought to investigate why. Our findings subsequently identified a particular theme: the supernatural, which was given particular momentum by media technologies. The findings therefore led us to realise that it was necessary to consider the *psychic* dimensions of contemporary religious discourse, as explored below.

American evangelism is big business in the USA and globally<sup>4</sup>, exemplified by the international syndication of American preachers' broadcasts on television. Most commentators (e.g., Lundby, 2002), would identify Meyer and Osteen as *televangelists*, but their digital presence makes this term too narrow to understand the pervasiveness of their ideas. Consequently, agreeing with Lundby's (2011) argument that online and offline structures should be considered in relative terms, we adopt the term *digital-televangelists* to acknowledge their use of both new and traditional media. Whilst Anglicanism and Catholicism are in decline, Meyer's and Osteen's evangelical non-denominational ministries (free from the demands of established church doctrine but well-situated in a non-conformist tradition as discussed by Ehrenreich, 2009) are witnessing significant global expansion and given momentum in relation to socio-cultural and technological developments. The success of these ministries also raises

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<sup>2</sup> Minnicks (2018).

<sup>3</sup> Phase Two involves a survey of 473 audience-believers, focus groups, and participant observation - Whitehouse-Hart (2018) *Overcoming the Battlefield of the Mind: A Psycho-cultural approach to Digital-televangelists' Self-Help Communication*. Paper. *God and The Gogglebox* Conference Queen's Foundation Birmingham 6 June, 2018; Whitehouse-Hart & Claydon (2018), "My Bible which I love I sometimes sit there hugging it": Psycho-cultural approaches to audience-believers and Christian self-help texts. Paper. *4<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Media and Popular Culture*, Leeds January 16-17, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Where the faith economy is worth \$1.2trillion a year - more than Apple and Google combined (Sherwood, 2016); and televangelists rank higher than Protestantism in terms of global wealth (Said, 2013).

questions about cross-cultural appeal and global media flows. Each are adept marketers of their message, utilising: TV, radio, websites, DVDs, social media sites, books, magazines, conferences and stadium lectures. They are best-selling authors and their media products and appearances have made them multi-millionaires in the Christian economic marketplace with huge *global*<sup>5</sup> followings<sup>6</sup>, and are also seemingly popular with non-church attending believers and a secular audience<sup>7</sup>. *JMM* is worth an estimated \$95 million per year (Said, 2013; Cutrer, 2004) with Osteen worth in excess of \$40 million (Schladebeck, 2017). They are friends and regularly work together and there is intertextual evidence of their relationship<sup>8</sup>.

Meyer grew up in a white working-class context to which she frequently refers and claims an allegiance in her teaching. Thus, she is not conventional preacher material, as she frequently acknowledges. Her compelling testimony of Biblical deliverance from sexual abuse by her father and overcoming shame with God's 'Word' delivered through scripture and in a 'voice' of the Holy Spirit, played a key role in her recovery (Bryan & Albakry, 2015). By comparison, Osteen's testimony tells his story of his reluctant inheritance of his church from his father (who overcame poverty) to build America's largest church. His identity in part aligns with the 'gospel of prosperity' (Winslow, 2014; Henderson, 2013) and a populist version of the *American Dream* (Webb, 2017). Distinctively, both are controversial and significant figures in the field of Christian 'self-help' literature, a literature which seeks to bring about *positive* change in the emotional life of the reader (Baity, 2011; Ehrenreich, 2009; Truth & Fire, 2016; Winslow, 2014).

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<sup>5</sup> Meyer is particularly popular with both US white and African-American women, boasts an extensive global female following (Frederick, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Their publications have been translated into many languages, they have offices based in Europe, Asia and Africa *Joyce Meyer Ministries* has 9 offices strategically located around the world, in Australia, Canada, South Africa, Russia, Ukraine, India, Uganda, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Germany, England, and the Middle East.' Retrieved from <http://www.joycemeyer.org/AboutUs/FAQ.aspx> and a global missions through its Hands of Hope' ranging from inmate support to disaster relief (retrieved from <http://joycemeyer.org/handsofhope/globalreach>). Lakewood, by comparison, will hold mission tours to Haiti and India in 2018. Both Meyer and Osteen's texts (in hardback, paperback, CD, audio-visual download and kindle-forms) are widely successful in Amazon sales in the sub-areas of Christian Living and Self-Help beyond the US (most highly in Australia and Germany, although Meyer sells very well in India too) (various Amazon Germany, Italy, France, India, Australia, UK and USA sites).

<sup>7</sup> Based on users' self-identifications within media contexts and sales success categories on a variety of Amazon sites, such as Self-Help, rather than Christianity as well as attendances at conference events in Canada, Australia, Europe, Korea, India, Malaysia, South Africa, Namibia, Democratic Republic of Congo.

<sup>8</sup> Demonstrating the mutual alignment between Lakewood and Joyce Meyer Ministries, Meyer regularly speaks at Lakewood Church (most recently on 7 July, 2018 — [www.lakewoodchurch.com](http://www.lakewoodchurch.com)) and our content analysis found similarity of titles and subject matter.

In order to facilitate this change, most ministries have an online presence, using customised apps and a range of digital options enabling believers to connect to the centre (Tomaselli & Shepperson, 2002), e.g., through prayer request options, Twitter and Facebook comments. The use of social media reflects the ability of the internet to be always connected where individual use is (pseudo)personalised and increasing emphasis is placed on more individualised forms of address (Lundby, 2002) in religious communication. These forms of address have added significance in that the 'Word' is not only from the ministry but a direct communication from God. Daily communication, through digital means, consequently prompting the receiver to engage, providing links to the ministry website and phone lines.

To investigate these practices, and the audience-believers' engagement, we explore the following questions:

1. How does digital-televangelical communication, with a specific focus on 'self-help', function?
2. How is language used to construct and maintain relationships between audience-believers, God and ministries?
3. Are there any psychological models that can be recognised in the communications and how do these function?

Thus, we interrogate the discourse, as a case study, to examine what might be both evocative and problematic for audience-believers in the current media and historical moment. In addition, the following questions are addressed in Phase Two (see n. 2) of the empirical study of audiences.

4. What media tools (both traditional and digital) are people using, why and how?
5. Are the texts helpful, harmful or without affect?

This article, consequently, develops a theoretical and critical understanding of the materials analysed, arguing that there is textual evidence for a specific communicative model being employed by Meyer's and Osteen's ministries. This model maps onto the audience-believers' psychological and psychic processes, which we call a 'psycho-theological process' presented later in the article (see Figure 1). We have since tested this proposition and have found it supported through our primary audience research in Phase Two (see n. 2). The next section therefore discusses the research methodology, followed by a critical-theoretical analysis of the evidence, the presentation of the psycho-theological process and further discussion followed by the conclusion, in which we summarise our findings.

## Method

The method used is a critical textual analysis, which focuses specifically on the language of the teachings and media communication from Meyer and Osteen. We have adopted a psycho-linguistic approach based on psychosocial principles that the 'outer' (social) and 'inner' (psychic) worlds as mutually constitutive (Redman, 2016). The role of language, in the construction of identities out of discourses circulating in society, is one feature of any discursive analysis. Reflecting the two stages of our process, we argue a text-based approach forms one important point of triangulation acknowledging that discourse is subject to internal processes and is transformed by the subject, which we explore further in Phase Two (Hollway et al, 2008, p. 2).

A fundamental approach for us was that the process should be bottom-up. As such, our work reflected the grounded theory technique which “offer[s] the greatest amount of freedom in the development of substantive theory” (Evans, 2013, p. 42). The fact the authors are a team means that our perspectives balance each other to ensure we do not read ‘into’ the texts but rather read evidence ‘out’ of the material. Our use of a grounded theory approach is pragmatic and loose in that it facilitates a psychosocial approach as outlined above: it “allows the researcher to explore all aspects of the theory” (Evans, 2013, p. 40) and opens up an analytical discourse concerned not only with present evidence but the possible psychosocial implications of that data.

Data collection for Phase One examined a roughly equal amount of content across two overlapping time frames in 2016, in conjunction with reviewing other writings to establish the consistency of messages. One researcher examined materials from Joyce Meyer’s ministry using a thematic analysis and one from Joel Osteen’s employing critical discourse analysis (via a content analysis) techniques and observed patterns independently but with the same guiding principles. The reason for using two techniques was to a) evaluate the efficacy of the different methods for analysing language in this media context and b) ensure that the bottom-up approach was not influenced by potential perspective bias. Results were, after collection, cross-compared and shared patterns identified to establish potential analytical priorities for answering our research questions. The findings are remarkably consistent across the two, emphasising the core linguistic structures in each pastor, which are evident in either method, are alike and utilise similar communicative tropes.

Our sample consisted of both traditional (books, magazines, television, radio) and digital media communication, including e-newsletters, blogs and the main app and e-communication *model* the ‘daily devotional’. The audient-believer (the singular term) receives a daily message connecting scripture to reflection to prayer (e.g., Meyer’s PTDA, *Enjoying Everyday Life* or Osteen’s *Today’s Word with Joel & Victoria*). In addition, we explored something that has not been extensively examined: official websites, Facebook and Twitter. These provide examples of audience responses to teaching. There is typically a relationship between all media modes, if only through repetition of themes, format and content.

As we started from the position that subjects are psychosocial we were always interested in both the social and psychic implications of religious discourse. However, we conducted the initial rounds of analysis to see if any particular conceptual or theoretical psychoanalytic models emerged from the texts. We also began analysis recognising that all religious discourse invariably presents the ‘Word’ of God as a transparent and unchanging truth. This recognition suggests the concomitant value with psychoanalysis of Foucauldian discourse analysis (for example in Foucault, 1990), which considers “how discourses make available particular truths about the world and how Language, as an explicit and implicit concept, influences people’s subjectivities” (Wiggins, 2016, p.33).

From the initial round of analysis, as we discuss below, we determined that Kleinian and post-Kleinian objects relations were relevant because of the extensive discourse in Meyer and Osteen that focussed on two significant objects: God and the devil. An object relations-informed approach generated a number of categories for analysis such as ‘relationships with God and Satan’, ‘evidence of spiritual warfare’ and ‘role of the

supernatural in everyday life and thought'. Also, this first stage of analysis saw 'language' and 'psychology' emerge as analytical categories. *Explicit* discourse about 'language' underpins large portions of the teaching of Meyer and Osteen. 'Language', linked to speech and thought, is a key communication theme underpinning their scriptural prescription for wellbeing and successful faith-based living. *Implicitly*, discourses from various psychological schools were detected within the texts: playing a specific role in how that scriptural prescription functioned, which further confirmed that a psychosocial approach was apposite.

### ***Emergent Discursive Themes in Meyer and Osteen***

Much of non-theological literature's engagement with religion has been largely critical, drawing on Marxist and Freudian approaches, which suggest religion is an 'illusion' with believers lacking psychological maturity (Freud, 2008 — originally 1927; Wright, 2006). Such an assumption we find problematic, at least in part, because studies of faith are often highly subjective. Meanwhile, those on discourse are typically decontextualized from theological content and context. As such, representational discourses miss out key cultural and analytical components (Klassen, 2013; Mizruchi, 2001). In addition to these issues, with regard to our focus on Christian media, recent studies have focussed on the production of 'prosperity gospel', neo-liberal ideology and patriarchal rhetoric (Baity, 2011; Ehrenreich, 2009; Winslow, 2014; Bryan & Albakry, 2015). When viewed through an anti-dogmatic, psychoanalytically-informed lens, drawing particularly on object relations, we argue that what can seem like simplistic ideologically-riven discourse of its time, linking Christianity with neo-liberal rhetoric (Baity, 2011; Ehrenreich, 2009; Winslow, 2014; Bryan & Albakry, 2015), is more complex in its communicative tropes and theoretical implications regarding affect and identity.

### **Language**

'Language' and its relationship to thought are core concepts, repeatedly appearing in large amounts of the teaching of both pastors: Meyer and Osteen have a significant and particular focus on 'Mind Mouth and Mood' (see Meyer, 2013; Meyer PTDA, 2016a<sup>9</sup>). Teaching distinctively echoes a variety of popular psychological models that link behavioural change to language and thought. For example, Cognitive Psychology (applied through CBT<sup>10</sup>), Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) and mindfulness. Approaches from these models, combined with the use of scripture, *direct* the audience-believer to actively construct a 'strong' and 'stable' Christian self-identity (e.g., *Power Words: What You Say Can Change Your Life*, Meyer, 2015; "God [He] creates with His words, and you do too [...] Use your words to change your situation", Osteen & Osteen, 2018).

### **Discipline**

Also distinctive to these ministries is the combination of a message of 'death to the self' (interest and motivation) and negative feelings e.g. self-pity (Meyer, 2018;

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<sup>9</sup> PTDA stands for *Power Thoughts Daily App* available for smart phone systems. The most recent edition is from 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Kaspar (2015), writing from within Lakewood's congregation, argues that Osteen's use of CBT techniques does not compromise theology.

Osteen, 2008b)<sup>11</sup> whilst excessively focussing on self-monitoring. Fundamentally, audience-believers are offered specific techniques for understanding identity and creating new ways of practicing faith which explicitly focus on the self: “Study your boss, study your manager [...] What steps are you taking to improve? If you’re not improving, you’re falling behind” (Osteen, 2016b). Urging believers to actively engage in reflexive projects of the self (Giddens, 1991) also has implications in terms of neo-liberal self-governance, in particular the disciplining of thought processes advocating forms of anxiety management through a narrowing and disciplining of thought<sup>12</sup>. Meyer (2006, p. 874), for example, argues that “stability releases ability”: “By disciplining our emotions, our moods, and our mouths, we become stable enough to remain peaceful whatever our situation [...] so that we can walk in the fruit of the Spirit” (Meyer, 2006, p. 874). That is, through encompassing contemporary discourses on self-discipline, thought-governance, ‘managed emotions’ (Hochschild, 1979), the confessional and eclectic pop-psychology, audience-believers are enabled to actively create the identity of an ‘Overcomer’ (the name of Osteen’s edited Lakewood talks for Bible TV).

## Testimony

Both ministries also manifest the rise of ‘confessional’ therapy culture (Rose, 2010; Furedi, 2002), which sits alongside the evangelical narrative tradition of the ‘testimony’<sup>13</sup>. Frank Furedi, perhaps the strongest critic of the therapeutic ethos, argues that ultimately this confessional trait creates a society which encourages individuals to imagine themselves as victims, with low expectations and a diminished sense of themselves (Furedi, 2002). Contrasting Furedi, Meyer and Osteen promote emotionally stable, powerful, self-reliant, resilient selves with high expectations for their lives. Ministry *slogans* such as “Enjoying Everyday Life” (*JMM*) and “Your Best Life Now” (Lakewood), capture the essence of their teaching based on John 10:10: “I came that they may have and enjoy life and have it in abundance to the full until it overflows<sup>14</sup>”. This stability, power, self-reliance and resilience supposes and *directs* that Christians *should* be prosperous, happy, free from negative thoughts and feelings and emotionally stable. To achieve this state, the Christian must develop a ‘new’ identity based on the idea that they are ‘in’ but not ‘of the world’ (John 17: 14-15<sup>15</sup>).

<sup>11</sup> Osteen has been criticised for his equation of ‘grief’ with self-pity see: <https://www.charismanews.com/culture/50246-in-open-letter-this-woman-demands-joel-osteen-apologize-to-millions-of-people-around-the-world>

<sup>12</sup> For example, Meyer’s, 2014 *Managing Your Emotions* and Osteen’s 2015 *You Can, You Will*. The latter uses “undeniable qualities of a winner” (the subtitle of the book) to shape self-conceptualisation

<sup>13</sup> This is where the believer shares personal experience and makes a public declaration about the role of God in their life. Osteen’s Lakewood services regularly appear on the Oprah Winfrey Network who is a significant figure in the development of therapy confessional discourse in the media (Illousz, 2003). For example, see: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_kjSK-PcU9o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_kjSK-PcU9o) *The Power of I Am* on Oprah Network.

<sup>14</sup> This verse is frequently used most recently Osteen’s Daily Devotional July 17, 2018

<sup>15</sup> John 17: 14-15 (Jesus to God) “I have given *and* delivered to them Your word (message) and the world has hated them, because they are not of the work, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that You will take them out of the world, but

## The Supernatural

The therapeutic acts encouraged within the teachings have a supernatural component in order to facilitate self-actualisation, for example, “I look at words as a way to reach into the spiritual realm and bring those words into reality [...]. Negative words make us feel negative about ourselves [...]. Thankfully, we can speak positive, life-filled words” (Meyer, Power Thoughts Daily App, January 26<sup>16</sup>). The assumption being that what you say about yourself is one of the central *causes* of emotional distress. For example, this article on Osteen’s ministry website (no date) concerning people who speak negatively about themselves (we note the similarity to Furedi’s disquiet about low expectations, as mentioned above):

They may not realise it but they are *cursing* (our emphasis) their future. Those words sink into their minds, before long they develop a defeated mentality, low self-esteem and diminished confidence, worse yet, those negative mind-sets can interfere with God’s plan for their lives.<sup>17</sup>

Faith is therefore proposed as an active process involving the performance of agency in areas of language and thought. The supernatural, we would argue, is a distinctive and dynamic linguistic-theological component because of its employment of fantasy-based imagery and hence affective potential, which psychoanalysis is well-placed to explore.

The trials of everyday life are shaped and understood with a particular cause and effect theological logic, which extensively forms their teaching, and is captured in the various titles, such as Meyer’s *The Battlefield of the Mind* (1995) and Osteen’s *30 Thoughts for Victorious Living* (2008a), both bestsellers. Examples of sermons with themes covered in daily e-devotionals, blogs, social media, include (from Meyer’s overlapping sources): Lies of the Devil, Ways to Defeat the Devil, Satan Comes at Once, Satan Loves to Attack Your Mind, and Dealing with the Devil. Osteen has also issued these: Give No Place to the Enemy, Don’t Give the Devil a Place, Victory Over the Devil, Don’t let the Devil Keep You Down and Satan Attacks When You Are Close to Destiny<sup>18</sup>.

## Mental Health

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that You will keep *and* protect them from the evil one” (Meyer, 2006, p. 1720). In the Bible, the definition of ‘world’ slides but is often society as ruled by Satan and is not the neutral concept we configure it as in normative speech. ‘Satan, who is the god of this world’ (Bible Gateway – <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2+Corinthians+4%3A4&version=NLT>).

<sup>16</sup> Remembering that the Power Thoughts Daily App cycles around the same days, repeating the year.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.joelosteen.com/Pages/Article.aspx?articleid=6505>

<sup>18</sup> Over a five-year period 2013-2018 there are huge numbers of talks, blogs, book titles, social media posts with similar titles.



In raising the spectre of the supernatural as a means to self-actualisation and wellbeing, our findings concur in part with and develop Webb, Stetz & Hedden's (2008) content analysis of Christian self-help bestsellers, which showed that Biblical teaching frequently refers directly and indirectly to what can be considered 'psychological disorders' (Webb, 2017) – specifically mood disorders: anxiety, depression, post-traumatic disorders, bi-polar. Indeed, Meyer frequently using the word 'epidemic' to refer the prevalence to these disorders across the population.<sup>19</sup> There is little *hard* evidence (beyond the observation that language is echoed) that Meyer and Osteen have consulted the specific psychological ideas we suggest are apparent in their teaching. It is, however, fair to say that both exist in a theological culture which, since the 1950s, has developed theology which incorporates psychological ideas: for example, televangelist Robert Schuller's theology of self-esteem (Voskuil, 1983, p. 94-115)<sup>20</sup>. We link this context to our findings that show crises for those with faith are frequently understood in terms of psychological disorder, with a distinctive psycho-neo-liberal direct 'solution'. For example, Meyer's (2006, p. 951) teaching on Psalm 143<sup>21</sup> is designated as:

...a biblical prescription for *depression*' (our emphasis) with a significant aspect of the 'cure' being 'not to meditate on his problem [...] in other words he thought about something good and it helped him overcome his *battle* (our emphasis) of depression. Never forget this, *your mind plays an important role in your victory* (Meyer's emphasis) [...]. We will win if we *discipline* (our emphasis) ourselves to meditate on the good things God has done.

Significantly, despite it being known that psychological disorders are caused by a variety of biological, social and experiential causes (Webb, 2017), these causes are seldom recognised in Biblical self-help teaching. Although emotions are recognised and validated, priority is given to the 'supernatural' to explain and understand the *cause* of emotional difficulties faced by believers. Indeed, it is rare to hear talk in evangelical discourse of treating depression with medication or professional psychotherapy. We therefore note that the discourse focusses *disproportionally* on 'spiritual' warfare with the believer's thought patterns implicated, for example, on the

<sup>19</sup> For example, Meyer's 2014d *Making Good Habits, Breaking Bad Habits*.

<sup>20</sup> That said, in Meyer's *Managing Your Emotions* (1997) chapters 9 and 10 explicitly use psychoanalytical terminology ('co-dependence' and 'the inner child'). Additionally, most seminary training institutions now offer courses in pastoral psychology and counselling skills e.g.,

<https://www.bu.edu/academics/sth/courses/pastoral-psychology-and-psychology-of-religion/>. Schuller developed his theology from a critical evaluation of Sigmund Freud, Alfred Adler, Abraham Maslow and Viktor Frankl, placing human needs for positive self-reinforcement above biblical instruction.

<sup>21</sup> Psalm 143 (A Psalm of David) – verses 3 and 4 speak specifically to pursuit by 'the enemy' and persecution of the soul: "Therefore is my spirit overwhelmed *and* faints within me [wrapped in gloom]; my heart within my bosom grows numb" (Meyer, 2006, p. 950, her parentheses).

audio CD for Meyer's *Battlefield of the Mind Action Plan*: "The devil wants us to think we're in a trap [and] it all begins in your mind" (Meyer, 2013, n.p.) and "Faith activates God—Fear activates the Enemy" (Osteen, widely cited but not widely sourced)<sup>22</sup>. Again, this discursive style positions Meyer and Osteen within the Pentecostal non-conformist practises noted earlier (Ehrenreich, 2009).

## Imagoes and Object Relations

For Freudian and post-Freudian theorists, God is an 'illusion' (see Forster & Karveth, 1999; McDargh, 1983). For some object relations theorists, however, this concept is seen less negatively, with religion being linked positively to illusion as a form of creativity as in the case of transitional phenomenon (Winnicott, 1971), or as defence against envy (Klein, 1957, 1959). It has also been suggested that people of faith generally represent themselves as happier than non-believers and enjoy greater wellbeing (Wilkins, 2008; Emerson & Frosh, 2009; Spencer et al, 2016). Other clinical studies suggest this process may in part be due to the universal propensity to formulate relationships with personalised 'God images' (Rizzuto, 1979; McDargh, 1983), that are also psychological 'resources'. The idea of God as a parent, which does feature in religious teaching, is significant therapeutically in terms of creating forms of secure 'attachment'. Bowlby (1988, cited by Gurney & Rogers 2007, p. 5) proposed that "the child develops an internal working model that contains beliefs and expectations about whether the caregiver is trustworthy and caring and as a result, whether the self is worthy of care". As Gurney and Rogers (2007, p. 966) comment, one who "feels loved by a higher power will, to use object relations language, develop a secure internal working model". Both ministries construct through their discourse a set of images about the character of 'God' to promote a 'strong' and 'stable' Christian identity to whom the believer ostensibly securely 'attaches'. Explicitly presenting reassuring images of a reliable and trustworthy God:

The subject of trust- or rather lack of trust- fills the headlines these days ... How do we know who is trustworthy? [...] When I don't trust God I am filled with doubt, fear, worry, and anxiety [...] But when I trust Him believing His Word and promises I have peace and enjoy life [...] We can trust God at all times, in every way, with ourselves and with everything.<sup>23</sup>

A number of significant studies of religious subjectivity state the psychological importance of these 'God images', which believers perceive as 'alive' in their inner world and with whom the believer has a dynamic and 'personal relationship' (Rizzuto, 1979). This perceived relationship combined with religious teaching is said to provide what Swinton (2001, p. 30) calls "a meaning-endowing framework" (for instance the

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<sup>22</sup> Phrase found on a variety of merchandise see:

<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/296884-faith-activates-god---fear-activates-the-enemy>

<sup>23</sup> <https://joycemeyer.org/everydayanswers/ea-teachings/who-can-i-trust> (no date).

role of the supernatural) that the believer uses to “interpret and understand” life experiences (see also Allport & Ross, 1967). Rizzuto (1979) noted that work is needed on understanding the ‘secondary’ role played by religious teachings and texts that ‘actively attempt’ to shape images of an omnipotent God image which, for us, suggests the need for more critical textual analysis studies. As we noted earlier, a significant proportion of the teaching refers the audience-believer back to ideas of spiritual warfare and it is this that makes the discourse affectively incongruous. Large portions of their teaching (implicitly and explicitly) invoke the terrain of the inner world as a ‘spiritual battleground’ between ‘good’ (God) and ‘bad’ (devilish) objects. This is exemplified by sermon titles for each such as Satan loves to attack your mind (Meyer, 2017<sup>24</sup>); and The battle for your destiny (Osteen, 2013a<sup>25</sup>), offering a particular perspective on ‘reality’, for example:

In this world you will have trouble” (John 16: 33) [...] Everyday, things come against us in life to steal our joy and rob us of our victory. In fact, throughout your whole life, the enemy has had one mission – to kill, steal and destroy your hope, vision and happiness. (Osteen, J., 2016a: March 23)

Osteen, in what is a typical example, has posted a biblical passage to which he and Meyer return repeatedly clearly summoning the ideas of threats and risk to the self, which we will argue below has implications for psychological equilibrium, for example:

Maintaining balance in all things is so important! If we do not, we open a door to Satan, who roams around hungrily seeking to devour us (see 1 Peter 5: 8) ... [I]f we do not maintain balance in our lives, Satan will take advantage of the door you have opened. Check your life and if you find areas out of balance, ask God to help you make whatever adjustments are necessary. (Meyer, 2006, p. 2085<sup>26</sup>)

Melanie Klein’s concept of the imago is pertinent: “denot[ing] an unconscious experience or phantasy of a concrete object physically located internal to the ego (body) which has its own motives and intentions’ (both benign and malevolent) ‘towards the ego and other objects” (Hinshelwood, 1989, p. 68). Klein (1946)

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<sup>24</sup> Satan loves to attack your mind is a sermon from Meyer’s Enjoying Everyday Life television programme that can be found in a number of locations and in a number of versions.

For example, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S\\_A8oH2FrCA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S_A8oH2FrCA)

<sup>25</sup> The Battle for your destiny is a blog posting on the Joel Osteen Ministries website. See: <https://www.joelosteen.com/Pages/Blog.aspx?blogid=7591>

<sup>26</sup> Meyer also uses this text on Twitter on May 11 2013, demonstrating how Meyer’s text is replicated across media.

focussed on the psychic and emotional distress generated by internal conflicts between objects, particularly at times when the self feels threatened and prioritised the dynamic role of unconscious phantasy, present in all conscious and unconscious mental activity and perception (Isaacs, 1952). Klein proposed the use of ‘primitive’ defence mechanisms, such as ‘splitting’ (‘good’ from ‘bad’ objects<sup>27</sup>) to deal with persecutory and paranoid forms of anxiety associated with the ‘paranoid-schizoid position’ (Klein, 1946). For Klein, the subject imagines him/herself being able to do things to his/her internal objects which may be beneficial, loving or harmful and destructive (Dawson, 1994, p. 33). For example, Meyer’s teaching on Ephesians 4:30<sup>28</sup>, such as by Meyer (2006, p. 1940): “The Holy Spirit lives inside of us [...] and show us the things we should [...] and [...] shouldn’t do. [...]B]y understanding that He has emotions and He can be grieved. Because He lives in us, when He feels grieved, we will feel it too” and “Some people believe when they have problems in life it is because God is angry with them for a past sin and wonder [...] is God punishing me?”<sup>29</sup>, and also “remember [...] God is in you. If the thought is reasonable and right do it! [...] Trust Him because He will teach you to hear His still small voice” (Osteen & Osteen, 2014, para. 3).

In the “depressive position” identified by Segal (1992, p.38), the ability to tolerate ‘good’ and ‘bad’ objects without feeling that safety is compromised is replaced by feelings of ambivalence and guilt for the damage done to loved objects through aggression and malevolence in phantasy and reality (e.g., grieving the Holy Spirit). This replacement of feelings represents a more mature position, less marked by omnipotent phantasies and maximising the loving aspect of the relationship with *both* the self and object whose imperfections can be tolerated (Ogden, 1989; Winnicott, 1971). For example, seen on Osteen and Meyer’s daily devotional apps: “God knows everything about us. Even on your worst day, in the most shameful situation, God knows and still loves you” (Osteen, 2016a), and “God is trying our faith to bring out patience but it brought [...] a lot of other junk to the surface such as pride, anger, rebellion, self-pity, complaining [...] these ungodly traits need to be faced [t]o eventually help us to mature” (Meyer, 2016a). These are not merely *developmental* stages but ‘positions’ we oscillate between throughout life (Ogden, 1989), and which ministry discourse evokes. This discourse is linked to spiritual ‘maturity’ and offers positive, negative thinking and declarations<sup>30</sup> as solutions.

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<sup>27</sup> Note the shift from scare quotes for the broad concept to quotation marks for the specifically Kleinian term.

<sup>28</sup> Ephesians 4:30 “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God [do no offend or vex or sadden Him], by whom you were sealed (marked, branded as God’s own, secured) for the day of redemption (or final deliverance through Christ from evil and the consequences of sin” (Meyer, 2006, p. 1940 – square brackets are Meyer’s addition to the Amplified Bible, which forms the basis of the *Everyday Life Bible* from her ministry).

<sup>29</sup> No date is provided for the article but this is from paragraph 11. Retrieved from <https://www.joycemeyer.org/everydayanswers/ea-teachings/god-is-mad-at-me-and-other-myths-part-2>

<sup>30</sup> Weekly Lakewood membership declaration: “This is my Bible I am what it says I am. I can do what it says I can do” Osteen /Lakewood 2018 [www.joelosteen.com](http://www.joelosteen.com)).

Klein also posits the quality of experience as relating to “libido and destructive tendencies” or ‘life’ and ‘death’ instincts, (Klein, 1997, p. 156), with the struggle between the two reflecting a foundational Biblical meta-narrative, a staple of ministry theology discourse. One feature can be the child’s relationships to unreal images as both “excessively good and excessively bad” (Klein, 1957, p. 158) with emotional effects correspondingly: ‘experience interpreted in accord with the death instinct will be attributed aggressive and dangerous meanings, whereas experiences organized in terms of the life instinct will be understood in terms of nurturing, loving meanings’ (Ogden, 1984, p. 504). For example, Meyer argues, “Proverbs 18:21<sup>31</sup> [...] teaches us that our words are so awesome, they are containers of power; they carry either a life-giving force or a destructive force” (*Death and life are in the power of the tongue*, in both Meyer 2006; Osteen 2017b; Osteen & Osteen, 2016). Thus, there are implications for emotional experience by thinking and saying ‘the wrong thing’; and Meyer frequently advocates ‘thinking about what you are thinking about’ in her media, for example on the *Power Thoughts* app: “God taught me I can *choose* my thoughts and control the way I think and speak [...]. I can think things on purpose that will positively affect my life. [...]. I can overcome negative thinking by setting my mind [...] on things above and you can too” (Meyer, 2016a).

Connecting this provocation once again back to the particularly American form of non-conformist faith practices and the implications for emotional experience are two-fold. One implication is that thinking and saying the ‘wrong’ thing will open the door to a spiritual attack as well as potentially ‘displeasing’ God and jeopardising the promised ‘blessings’. The second is the anxiety generated by constant monitoring of thought and speech and the uncertainty of what qualifies as ‘wrong’. Hence the need for the ministries to step in and guide arises.

Ostensibly, Meyer and Osteen attempt to strengthen the libido and promote connection with good and loving objects. Utilising ideas echoing self-psychology’s (Kohut, 1977) attempt to create and reinforce robust self-esteem, Meyer and Osteen often provide variations upon the ideas ‘God loves and approves of you’ (e.g., Meyer’s August 8, 2017 daily devotional on Romans 8:31<sup>32</sup> and Osteen’s on May 27, 2015). The subject, who is ‘in Christ’ is seen as “perfect and approved child who is the gleam in the parents’ [in this case God’s] eyes” (Lessem, 2005, p. 40). The parents’ delighted, approving responses and pride are essential for healthy emotional development as these reflect “back to the child a sense of self-worth and value” (Lessem, 2005, p. 40). This valuation can be seen in Meyer’s daily devotional post: “You are so valuable to God! You’re worth celebrating [...] You are awesome [ ]. I hope you also know how pleased and delighted God is with you [...] God is pleased with me and He delights in me” (Meyer, January 14, 2014c).

Meyer and Osteen also recognize the significance of past hurts that can be healed supernaturally and through the recognition of a non-judgemental God/ parent. As Meyer (2011) argues in a podcast: “Some of you, because you have been hurt in the

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<sup>31</sup> Proverbs 18:21 “Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and they who indulge in it shall eat the fruit of it [for death or life]” (Meyer, 2006, p. 992 – parentheses her edit).

<sup>32</sup> Romans 8:31 “What then shall we say to [all] this? If God is for us who [can be] against us?” (Meyer, 2006, p. 1882 – parentheses her edit).

past, you don't see yourself the way you are at all [ : ] the way God sees you. You have a warped perception and you don't see the value, the worth, the preciousness that you have to God", and supernaturally: "I declare that any curse or negative word that's ever been spoken over you, in the name of Jesus, that curse is broken right now" (Osteen & Osteen, 2009, p. xii).

Secure attachment to diminish forms of anxiety and emotional distress is strongly promoted. Both preachers produce communications attempting to support the believer in processes of what Dawson calls "subjective composure" (1994, p. 34). A temporary psychic resting place, subjective composure comes from helping the audience-believer to construct, through thought and word, an identity for oneself in the tradition of the testimony narrative (here as a valued child of God and 'overcomer'). 'Peace' is consequently promised if the believer makes the right thought choices to increase faith. Using their own powerful testimonies (telling and speaking particularly about being 'changed' by faith), Meyer and Osteen profile behavioural models that the audience-believer is encouraged to adopt. These models are in keeping with what Dawson sees as the state of being calm and obtaining psychic reassurance (Dawson, 1994). This state reached, in turn, will provide another benefit, of a form of socio-religious recognition of the audience-believer as a *successful* 'intrinsic' Christian, where their faith extends to *all* aspects of their life (Allport & Ross, 1967; Mickley et al, 1995). In contrast, 'extrinsics' only compartmentalise religion for defensive use against anxiety (Allport & Ross, 1967; Mickley et al, 1995). Thus, psychological disorder, e.g., anxiety, rests with the audience-believers' inability to put God first in everything – see Victoria Osteen's 2018a podcast and Joel Osteen's Twitter posting: "If you keep putting God first place, His blessings will chase you down" (Osteen, August 4, 2013). In addition, as Meyer writes (n.d.-a, para. 12), "It's not about having a program to follow—it's simply about forming a habit of putting God first in everything we do. If we will seek first His Kingdom, He has promised to add everything else that we need (see Matthew 6:33<sup>33</sup>)".

Summerfield (2004, p. 69), however, notes that subjective composure may not always be achieved. The constant difficulty of being unable to gain control of thought, speech and destructive impulses, as we found in Phase Two of our research, is a particularly challenging terrain shaped by memory and self-ideation. This challenge may in fact produce dis-composure, personal dis-equilibrium, discomfort and anxiety. For example, this exchange on Meyer's Facebook 'wall' concerning viewing pornography:

Post: I have an addiction problem, where the enemy has sneaked in through the back door via my loneliness; [...] I feel ashamed of myself, and I felt The Holy Spirit yelling at me to not do it, [...] I knew that I had done wrong, and I did feel badly about it. I need prayer, but even though my place of worship is wonderful [...] the enemy is telling me not to go there for prayer.

Reply from JMM: Hi [X]! God must become your strength! To break the cycle of addiction-Depend on Him! Fill your mind with God's Word. We are praying for you!

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<sup>33</sup> Matthew 6:33 "But seek (aim at and strive after) first of all His kingdom and His righteousness (His way of doing and being right), and then all these things taken together will be given you besides" (Meyer, 2006, p. 1491).

Hyperlinked Ad underneath for Meyer's *You Can Win the Battle in Your Mind*

Reply from Congregant-User: I pray for your release from bondage... remember... the closer you draw to the devine [sic] nature in you... the harder the underworld will pull you... lie to you... decieve [sic] you, with negative internal self-talk. Train Yourself Not to be convinced of such doubts. (JMM Facebook, September 29, 2014)

We note here a circular process, which typifies much of the ministries' engagement with audience-believers, explored below.

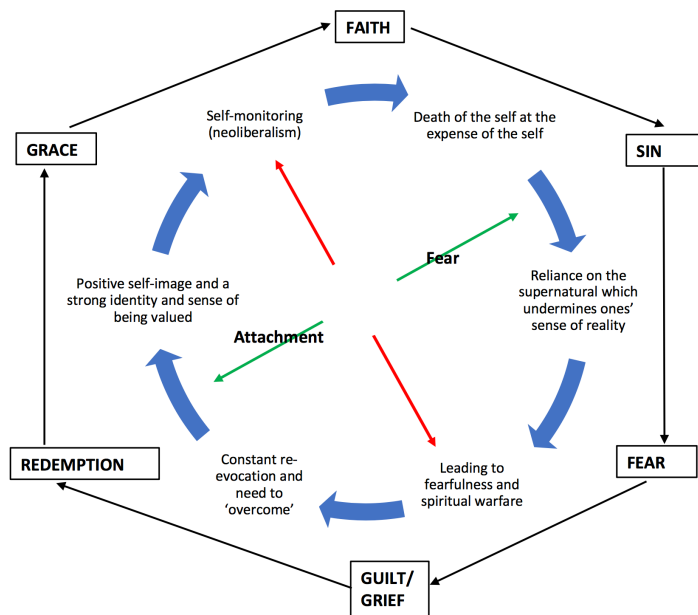
## The Psycho-Theological Process

As observed, biblical teaching frequently links God and Satan with spiritual life and death. Klein's concepts of the life and death instincts capture the emotional tone of the audience-believers' struggles, which the ministries, as seen above, hermeneutically translate as spiritual attack. The style of teaching evokes experience dominated by "the death instinct, in which aggression, gives rise to anxiety and anxiety reinforces aggression" (Klein, 1997, p. 156). However, as Klein noted, this aggression can be broken and the life instinct can "maintain itself against the death instinct' once 'libidinal forces [have] gained in strength:" (Klein, 1997). The life instinct is ostensibly strengthened, in this case, through a relationship with a living God and supplemented by ministry support. Klein therefore provides a useful touchstone to illuminate the circular process identified in the ministries' materials.

In part, this conflict between instincts maps onto the affordances of the digital technologies. If the ministries did not personalise (in the case of Facebook) or provide motivational stimuli (as in the daily devotionals and Twitter feeds), the audience-believer would fail to feel embraced by the ministries they have followed. In addition to this, the tone of the ministries' print literature is also both sympathetic and empathetic, emphasising that what believers feel are not isolated emotions beyond a society within faith. As such, the way in which, for example, both Meyer's and Osteen's bibles are written, is based upon regular encountering and working through developmental concepts (such as Osteen's 'Hope for Today' pages on the ministry website<sup>34</sup>). Digital media, however and specifically, has created a contested space filled with a discourse of trust and distrust, of followers and followed – its immediacy, linguistic informality and virtual environment permitted dialogue can enable those who might find more difficulty in a face-to-face encounter. Figure 1 demonstrates the psycho-theological process.

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<sup>34</sup> <https://www.joelosteen.com/Pages/Articles.aspx>



**Figure 1**

The psycho-theological process

Assuming an entry point that responds to teaching that focusses on sin, fear, and grief, the subject feels initially under attack by the devil (Romans 7, 17-19<sup>35</sup>), who is prowling both inside and outside. The “sudden appearance of [a] persecuting bad object” Hinshelwood (1989, p. 312), creates paranoia and can be frightening, particularly to those suffering psychological disorders (Webb, 2017). This “sudden appearance” is also associated with the failure of good objects to live up to expectations and therefore the ministries need to promote a supernatural God as an ‘ideal’ rather than as a good object (Hinshelwood, 1989). For example, using categories we have identified and which map onto the chart above:

1: *Sin*: “I do not do the good I want to do but the evil I do not want to do this I keep on doing [...] If I do what I do not want to do it is no longer I who do it but it is sin living in me” (Osteen & Osteen, 2009, p. 1269). Thus, audience-believers are taught that their own destructive impulses are being influenced by the devil (sin) who is residing a persecuting object in the world.

2: *Fear*: “Satan is looking for someone to devour. You have to be on your guard at all times’ (Lakewood Church, 2014, n.p. This warning emphasises that there is something to be overpowered through faith but which leads to -

<sup>35</sup> Romans 7:17-19 “So now [if that is the case, then] it is no longer I who do it [the disobedient thing that I despise], but the sin [nature] which lives in me. For I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my flesh [my human nature, my worldliness—my sinful capacity]. For the willingness [to do good] is present in me, but the doing of good is not”.

(<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=romans+7%2C+17-19&version=AMP> – their square parentheses)



3: *Guilt/Grief* (resulting from sin and fear of the sin):

JMM post ‘Don’t Grieve the Holy Spirit’^ Carol [Link to Ephesians 4:30, see n.21]  
Post: How and why would you grieve the Holy Spirit?: I’m confused.

JMM reply: [...] Anything that saddens the heart of God, grieves the Holy Spirit.  
God bless!

User Reply: [...] To grieve the spirit is to act out in a sinful manner, whether it is  
thought only or in both thought and deed.  
September 29, 2014 Facebook JMM<sup>36</sup>

Clearly, primitive, phantastic object relations associated with split ‘good’ and ‘bad’ objects are connoted. The perceived ‘sin’ grieves the Holy Spirit (imago), generating guilt that suggests the subject’s recognition of the flaws of self (not putting God first, not having enough faith) within the depressive position. This constant need to re-evoke (repeatedly coming back to the same issues) leads the audient-believer towards a position of watchfulness, seeking to overcome that grief and its connotations.

4: *Redemption*: God comes forgivingly, e.g., “[Y]ou know what justified means? Made just as if we have never sinned — Romans 3: 23-24<sup>37</sup>” (Meyer’s Twitter account, November 11, 2013). Consequently, the believer is given a ‘new’ identity, as loved and perfect, potentially creating a (temporary) equilibrium associated with subjective composure.

5: *Grace/Faith*: Here, as well as a new and perfect identity, the subject *also* acquires, through faith, supernatural powers and can then *recognise/ interpret* life events as spiritual ‘attacks’. Meyer (2014b) advises on video: “your war is not with people, it is with the devil and he works through people” and “Satan assigns people to assault you all the time”, so that there are constant internal and external attacks (social) from the devil, that Osteen frequently cites in his daily devotional. For both, a key supernatural power acquired through faith is the recognition that thought is seen as is under attack. As Osteen’s ministry blog put it in 2013:

The Enemy [...] will show up in your thoughts. As the Bible says, the battle in your life is not against flesh and blood; it’s against the forces of darkness and the *battlefield is your mind* [our emphasis, note the similarity with Meyer’s seminal

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<sup>36</sup> The ^ is within the text online and resembles a partial title formatting style sometimes seen by international writers on the internet.

<sup>37</sup> Romans 3:23-24 “Since all have sinned are falling short of the honor *and* glory which God bestows *and* receives. [All] are justified *and* made upright *and* in right standing with God freely *and* gratuitously by His grace (His unmerited favour and mercy), though the redemption which is [provided] in Christ Jesus” (Meyer, 2006, p. 1805 – her square parentheses).

*The Battlefield of the Mind*]. The Enemy will try to get you off course in your thinking [...]. God's word is your spiritual sword... use it to win your battle!<sup>38</sup>

However, reminded in further teachings of his/her weakness and their inability to prevent 'attacks' (i.e., stop negative thoughts and feelings), the subject is returned to feelings of paranoia and sinful guilt (combining paranoid-schizoid and depressive anxieties), hence the need to re-engage with the ministry for reassurance.

## Magical Thinking

In the ideal promoted by Osteen and Meyer's language, the individual is gifted the *supernatural* agency to *reject* negative events and circumstances and become more resilient (Osteen, 2017c, pp. 241-244). However, as outlined above, this is a fragile agency, that threatens subjective composure because its supernatural evocation of the 'bad' object. In various ministry communications, the audient-believer is driven to anxiously *return* to the ministries. Rearmament and reassurance are offered through processes of consumption (see Figures 2-4) and within self-help teaching products.



Figure 2

Webpage

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.joelosteen.com/Pages/Blog.aspx?blogid=7591>



Figure 3

Facebook



Figure 4

Twitter

All of the ‘gifts’ God bestows upon the believer (e.g., the ‘authority’ to cast out demons, to perform miracles, to heal or to speak in tongues), can be seen as forms of ‘magical thinking’ (Ogden, 2010). This is because they encourage the believer to “rel[y] on omnipotent phantasy [about God internally] to create a psychic experience that the individual experiences as ‘more real’ than external reality” (Ogden, 2010, p.

319). In magical thinking, like ministry theology, “the illusion [is encouraged that] one is not subject to the laws that apply to others, including the laws of nature, the inescapability of time, the role of chance, the irreversibility of death and so on” (Ogden, 2010, p. 319).<sup>39</sup> Osteen frequently tells the story of his mother’s supernatural healing from terminal cancer (2018a, p. 321) but other examples typify the language put to work: “If God can overrule death, the grave and the forces of darkness, He can overrule anything that comes against you” (Osteen, April 1, 2018, Twitter), and “I give unto you the power to tread on serpents and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means hurt you” (Luke 10:19<sup>40</sup>, Meyer PTDA), and also “If you’re battling unhealthy behaviours [...] the Holy Spirit can give you the ability to resist the devil and make healthy choices. [...] On your own, it would be impossible. But when you operate in the Spirit, you have a supernatural ability to overcome”. (Meyer, J. n.d.-b – this link to an undated Everyday Answers teaching no longer opens)

And concerning the relationship of the subject to reality:

If we don’t know the Word, we won’t have anything against which to measure theories and arguments that rise up in our thoughts. The enemy can present wild ideas that make sense to us. The fact that thoughts are logical doesn’t mean they are from God. We may like what we hear, but the fact that something appeals to us doesn’t mean it is from God. (Meyer, June 15, 2018 *Stay Safe in God’s Word JMM blog*)

Whilst Victoria Osteen writes:

The strongest part of you is not your physical body or your emotional or soulish realm. The strongest part of you, the eternal part of you, is your spirit man. And when you connect the strongest part of you with the strongest force in the universe, there’s an exchange that takes place. There’s a powerful transformation that takes place! (Osteen, V., 2018b, blog posting)

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<sup>39</sup> Whilst we do not present a detailed account of the results of the audience-believer study here, it is worth indicating here that we found some concerns around sufferers of particular disorders such as bipolar and manic depression that omnipotent thoughts and phantasies of the supernatural can sometimes lead to an increase in sufferers’ manic behaviour and pronouncements (see n. 2).

<sup>40</sup> Luke 10: 19 (also see Meyer, 2006, p. 1632).

Another feature to help the subject achieve composure involves divorcing thought from feeling. There is agreement in clinical practice that the articulation and recognition of feelings, in all their complexity, is “good for us [...T]here are occasions where it might be necessary temporarily to defend ourselves against them” (Frosh, 2011, p. 21). As Frosh further observes, “the general mental health rule is be in touch with your feelings” (Frosh, 2011, p21). Meyer (2014a) states in an *Enjoying Everyday Life* sermon that we live in an *illusory* state: “our feelings don’t tell us the truth”. She rejects feeling in favour of thought discipline and later berates her audience: “I think, I feel, I want: I’m so tired of hearing people say this over and over and over” (Meyer, 2014a). Satan, she argues, “uses our feelings to manipulate us and we have to learn what the Word says to overcome our feelings” (Meyer, 2014b, p. 55). For theorists like Bion (1962) and Ogden (2010) thinking and feeling are inextricably linked: our feelings are central to knowledge — and thought is not possible without feeling. From the outset, it is possible to see that Meyer’s and Osteen’s call to divorce thought and feeling, across their publications, is problematic for these reasons. Paradoxically, whilst drawing on therapeutic language, they then dismiss therapeutic approaches that encourage individuals to share and explore thought and experience, in favour of cognitive selection of the ‘right’ kind of thoughts from which, they propose, *only positive* feelings will follow. This dismissal is a denial of the complexity of emotional experience. As noted, the level of thought disciplining that Meyer and Osteen propose, is inherently impossible. It predisposes the subject to perceptual continual failing, creating anxiety and internal conflict, which is due to the presence of ambivalent affect towards God as the ideal object who disappoints (Hinshelwood, 1989), hostile impulses in relation to internal objects (i.e., the Holy Spirit) and external objects in the social world that believers encouraged to love.

## Conclusion

In 2016, religious think tank THEOS<sup>41</sup> conducted a meta-analysis of research on faith and wellbeing, concluding that generally faith is good for wellbeing. However, they note that the overall findings must be tentative, as it is recognised that religion may not support wellbeing equally. How faith does or doesn’t support wellbeing it not fully understood: we need to “delineate the ways in which different aspects of religion are correlated with different types of wellbeing” (Spencer *et al*, 2016, p. 10). We note that this review does not include analyses of media texts, communication and linguistics or the role of media technologies (see Rizzuto, 1979). Responding to this gap in research from a particular theoretical and methodological perspective, we examined digital and other media outputs, whilst utilising insights from psychoanalytical theory and media textual analytical approaches. Exploring the evocative psychosocial potential of the discourse of digital-televangelist’s teaching, we argue that the discourse is potentially positive, with the digital providing an instant Biblical first-aid kit: “God’s Word contains an answer to every problem ... [...] apply God’s Word to situations in your life as you would apply medicine to an injury” (Meyer, 2006, p. iii). Yet it is also contradictory and ambivalent. We recognise that Meyer’s and Osteen’s discourse, exemplifying this contemporary form of evangelical-neo-liberal religious teaching, has potential unconscious consequences that require further empirical examination. We have argued that the discourse attempts to create strong guilt-free attachments between

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<sup>41</sup> THEOS [www.theosthinktank.co.uk](http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk) – also see Evans, 2017.

‘good’ objects and the identity of an ‘overcomer’, creating periods of subjective composure, albeit transient, that have the potential to help ‘feel better’. This betterment is to be done, however, in the context of behavioural self-monitoring, emotional management denying feelings, monitoring thoughts and advocating only positive thinking. As Meyer says in one of her Enjoying Everyday Life television spots (on YouTube) “To have a good life you have to learn how to die to self – it is through control of thoughts which keep you in tune with God’s word” (Meyer, 2016b). At the same time the significance of spiritual warfare and engaging with reality ‘magically’, through the lens of the supernatural, creates a circular anxiety and (re)solution: a persistent *recherché* of ‘fundamental factor[s] in the dynamic processes of the mind’ (Klein, 1997, p. 157). Anxiety generated in this process, during which one constantly attempts to align thoughts and feelings and attain composure, is physically and emotionally exhausting for audient-believer. Anxiety of spiritual attack is potentially generated with each ‘failure’ to align thoughts and feelings with ‘the Word’. Our second phase of research found clear indications that this feature of discourse can create anxiety for audience-believers. This anxiety ranges from frustration due to excessive digital address (often interpreted as spiritual attack) to hermeneutic anxiety around conflicting issues of Biblical certainties and truth. We also found evidence in Phase Two that ideas of spiritual warfare generate fear and paranoia for those with mental health problems, leading to our shared concerns for the production of ‘responsible’ theology (Webb, 2017; Mind and Soul Foundation website, 2018), which we explore further in forthcoming papers.

If you are struggling with thoughts and feelings the ministries urge engagement through their communication prompts. Whether it be the ease of clicking from one page to another and finding near-instantaneous support or through the real-time process of post, reply, read, think, act and return. Consequently, the structure of the communication is key to the effectiveness of the discourse and the logic of the connections are central to the *affectiveness* of the text: Believers should cast “all your anxieties, all your worries, all your concerns” (digitally) onto God (I Peter 5:7; Meyer, 2006, p. 2086). We are not proposing that audience-believers are more predisposed to ‘primitive thought’, as clearly they are not (Frosh, 2011; THEOS, 2016), but we are highlighting that this particular theological approach, in the current epoch, is particularly suited to the reiterative nature of online communication and ongoing engagement and re-engagement by users. It would be unlikely for other media audiences to be repeatedly addressed and encouraged to assess their experience through this particular construction of reality, which also serves an economic function creating a relationship with the ministry to which audience-believers return and often support financially (partnering<sup>42</sup>) and through consumption of merchandise.

We recognise that religion has *always* been mediated (Campbell, 2012). Following Morgan’s (2013 p. 350) argument that “mediation is how feelings are packaged and deposited, remembered, rehearsed, shared and broadcast, transmitted and ritualized”, we note that developments in new media have created specific linguistic and performative methods to fulfil these functions in psychosocial ways. Thus, the specific contribution of the digital is largely a reflection of the temporal qualities of online engagement, providing a form of holding (Winnicott, 1971) and a possible containing space for projections (Bion, 1962). This digital context, as a space for projections

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<sup>42</sup> Regular financial support and tithing for the ministry.

itself, is a marker of contemporary communication which provides an inexorable set of connections through which the digital-televangelist is able to instinctively grasp the power of psychic life and the therapeutic zeitgeist and provide forms of 'holding', at a time when other branches of Christianity are in decline with global cross-cultural resonance. In particular, as Mahan (2012, p. 14) observed of digital media cultures and religion, "authority shifts from the traditional locations such as sacred writings, traditions and religious authorities to the individual internal authority of religious consumers involved in religious self-construction" in which digital-televangelists have intervened. Thus, this work contributes to understanding the role of religious discourse and media forms in religious experience and subjectivity.

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## Authors' Biographical Note

Drs E. Anna Claydon and Jo Whitehouse-Hart work in the School of Media, Communication and Sociology at the University of Leicester. Whilst both have a history of working with psychoanalysis in media analysis (and both of their PhDs can be said to have psychosocial implications), most of their pre-existing work as individuals has been on film and music (Claydon) and television and audiences (Whitehouse-Hart). They are also currently working with Dr Tracy Simmons (also at the University of Leicester) on a book about somatic society and engagements with the body.

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